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The Christian
CENTURY

The Trinity and Women's Experience

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THE ROLE of women in the church is as old as the Christian movement itself. In recent years, however, we have witnessed some new developments. Women are claiming new roles in congregational life. They are challenging some of the old patriarchal habits. And they are asking all Christians to expand their understanding of the human community, and even of God. These trends are, I believe, healthy ones.

For most of us, faith development is a process. We grow in wisdom and stature and favor with God. As a Christian woman I know that my consciousness about the feminist agenda has evolved in stages.

First, I became aware of generic language. Words like "mankind," "brotherhood" and the overused pronoun "he" were supposed to describe all of humanity. But it was clear that they contained a masculine bias. Little girls were hearing those words literally and scaling down their self-image. I decided that even if I was not personally bothered by such terms, inclusive language was a matter of justice. Language both reflects the way we think and informs what we think. That was stage one in my feminist journey.

It was not long, however, before I moved beyond my concern about language referring to human beings and became concerned about the masculine bias in language about God. If Christians insist that God is without gender, why do we call God "he" at every turn? In this second stage of my journey, I argued that any words which defined and limited God through male metaphors and pronouns were not only exclusive, they were idolatrous.

At this point I refused to use any gender-specific "God

language." God was the Holy One, the Rock, the Wind, the Spirit, the Eternal or the Still Small Voice. But I had a problem: I continued to believe that God is personal. The very meaning of incarnation informs us that the God whom we know in Jesus Christ cares about us and loves us like our parents, our friends, our lovers. Yet I had never met a "person" who was not male or female. It was clear that the understanding of God as objective force or philosophic idea was not an aspect of Christian theology: furthermore, faith in the unmoved mover was personally inadequate.

So in stage three I happily recovered certain words about God. I learned to pray to God who is like a mother as well as a father. By celebrating the feminine attributes of God, I sought to redress the imbalance of language habits that focus on God's maleness. And in this process I even discovered that the traditions of Goddess worship can enrich Christian theology.

My faith journey, however, has moved on to yet another stage. In recent years I have reclaimed a very old and very important Christian way of speaking about God: the doctrine of the Trinity. I am now convinced that trinitarian theology captures some of the unique message of the gospel and expresses certain understandings of God consistent with women's experience.

ON ONE LEVEL the trinitarian formula of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is totally unacceptable—an old man, a young man and a dove. The words are redolent of hierarchy and patriarchy. Even when it is argued that the Hebrew word for the Spirit is feminine, the masculine bias of trinitarian dogma seems overwhelming. Furthermore, trinitarian theology is hierarchical (the Son proceeds from the Father, etc.). Im-

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plying that all of creation is ordered from the top down, such theology can justify oppressive political and social systems. It can also be argued that the doctrine of the Trinity violates the unity of God, calling on Christians to worship three gods instead of one. At first glance it is hard to imagine how any modern feminist committed to the liberation of the community of women and men in the church can find trinitarian theology helpful. But let us examine it more closely.

First, we must place all theology in context. As the Old Testament affirms, God is incomparable. Isaiah writes that we dare not make our God out of gold, or carry the divine around in a neat package to sit here or stand there. God reminds Israel, and all peoples, that "I am God and there is no other, I am God and there is none like me" (Isa. 46:3-11).

Yet Christians assert that in Jesus Christ we have a special revelation about God. The letter to the Colossians tells us that "Christ is the image of the invisible God." In Christ, God created everything; in union with Christ all things hold together; in Christ all things are reconciled to God, bringing peace on earth and in heaven (Col. 1:15-20). To be a Christian is to assert that Jesus Christ has reshaped human knowledge about God. But how?

The early Christians agreed that it was essential to explain the relationship between Jesus and God. Yet their assertions about Christ raised questions about the unity of God. Trinitarian theology provided an important solution; it kept Christians from backsliding into superstitious polytheism, but it also prevented Jewish montheism from undermining the significance of Christ. The distinctive contribution of Christianity was not monotheism, but a trinitarian understanding of God which recognized differences in the work of God in history, and also maintained the unity of God (Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *Beyond Theism* [Oxford University Press, 1985], pp. 14-15).

Two words have been used historically to speak about the Trinity. One is the Latin word "persona"; God is three persons in one nature or substance. Derived from the language of the theater, the word "persona" refers to masks worn by actors in their roles on stage. Today we give the word "person" more individualistic connotations, but in trinitarian theology the persons are three different characterizations of one dynamic actor.

A second word used to explain the Trinity is the Greek word "hypostasis." "Hypostasis" is more than a mask or mode of appearance; it points to the individual existence of a particular nature. Although this word is also translated into English as "person," it emphasizes the belief that the trinitarian persons are not simply "modes of being" but individual, noninterchangeable subjects of the one common divine substance. Trinitarian persons are unique, but they are defined not only by their relationship to their common nature (or how they appear to others); they exist as community.

Historical theology reflects these two ways of defin-

ing the Trinity. The first refers to how the One God is *known*, as when we speak about God the creator, redeemer and sustainer. These words describe God's work in the world (the *oikumene*). But this so-called economic definition of a triune God fails to express the trinitarian truth that there is One God *existing* in community. This is the view of the Trinity as immanent, the way in which God embodies the very nature of reality as relational or communal.

As children of God we experience God's love in many ways, and we believe that we are created in God's image. Therefore, we need both "economic" and "immanent" understandings of the triune God. We are called

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to respond to God's various ways in the world. And we are invited to discover who we are by recognizing the relational nature of God. It is in connection with this second insight that I find trinitarian theology consistent with women's experience.

CAROL GILLIGAN, in her study of psychological theory and women's development titled *In a Different Voice* (Harvard University Press, 1982), contends that, unlike men, women find their identity in relationship. Furthermore, she notes that women's relationships do not follow patterns of hierarchy, but borrow more comfortably from the image of the web. Assumptions about hierarchy and power, common to men, are replaced by women with experiences of interconnection. Women know themselves as separate only insofar as they live in connection with others, and they experience relationship only insofar as they differentiate other from self. In short, for women there is a fusion of identity and the web of intimacy (pp. 62 and 159).

Jean Baker Miller, in her book *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (Beacon Press, 1977), states that women know relationships of dominance and subordination and the resulting experiences of oppression. However, women also know the positive potential of relationships. Miller calls for a new psychology of women that will build upon the context of attachment which characterizes women's lives and upholds affiliation above the male ideal of self-enhancement (p. 83).

Some theologians who value trinitarian theology insist that what is most important about belief in a triune God is not that we see God in three ways, but that we understand God as dynamic community. Within the triune God there is a special energy which expresses the love of God experienced in Jesus Christ (Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* [Harper & Row, 1981]).

All of us who have fallen in love know this reality. A friendship between two persons may "exist" for years;



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Mrs. Overholt's Garden

Every year in April
 She had the garden plowed.
 When she was past eighty
 I often saw her hoeing
 Potatoes or a neat
 Row of hustling sweetcorn.
 Cabbage, carrots, beets,
 Prize tomatoes: the list
 Would reach as long as your arm.
 There were zinnias, phlox,
 Cosmos, marigolds,
 Not to mention the likes
 Of such loyal volunteers
 As poppies, larkspur, moss rose.
 She had a way with earth
 And all such elements
 As sunshine, clouds, rain,
 Even the coming frost.
 She set such store by spring
 That winter was merely a test
 Of faith. Her roots went deep,
 Deeper, for sure, than death.

John Robert Quinn.

the relationship is there, but it is static. Then, suddenly it changes, and the interpersonal situation comes alive with intense emotion and empathy. Lover and loved are one. Individuals shine and actually discover themselves in the love of the other. Their caring is so deep and full that it spills over into the lives of family and friends, and we cannot be in their presence without being touched by that love.

To believe in a triune God is to suggest that there is an inner relational energy within Godself which spills over into the Christian life. John of Damascus, an eighth-century theologian, describes this way of understanding God by proposing that there is an exchange of energy between the persons of the Trinity by virtue of their eternal love. The unity of the Trinity is not static substance, or even familial relationship; it exists as open and loving community. John of Damascus uses the Greek word "perichoresis" to describe what is going on within Godself. "Perichoresis" comes from the same root as the word "choreography." It suggests that there is a circulatory character within the eternal divine life (Moltman, pp. 173-174).

When we worship a triune God we celebrate the love which flows in God's eternal dance of togetherness, and which we know, through Jesus Christ as Lord of the dance. And when women, dancing Sarah's circle, affirm the importance of relationships in human life, they are doing more than reflecting women's psychology; they are showing all Christians what it means to be created in God's image.

The doctrine of the Trinity erodes the monarchical and patriarchal power of monotheism. When God is no longer viewed as solitary and stark unity, or absolute unrelated personality, we are able to live *with*—not just fall down before—our God. Much theology has emphasized the dominance of God and the sinfulness of humanity. But a truly social doctrine of the Trinity contains the vision of a community of women and men in church and society without privilege or subjection to each other—or to God. Trinitarian theology asserts that relationship is fundamental to God and that community is the foundation of God's interaction with the world. Instead of an unmoved mover, God as community calls us to shared responsibility.

Understood in this way, the doctrine of the Trinity sets forth a radical ethic of justice and care very similar to the ethic that psychologists see within women's lives. It is based on a vision that the self and the other should be treated as of equal worth; that despite differences in power, things should be fair; that everyone should be responded to and included and that no one should be left alone and hurt (Gilligan, p. 63). It sees morality as a problem of inclusion rather than a balancing of claims. It sets up standards of nurturance, responsibility and care (Gilligan, pp. 159-160).

Women have experiences that lead them to understand God as community and to share an ethic that measures strength in terms of relationships. Just as the love of human lovers sometimes invades our lives with its passion, so God's community will not let us rest. "Christ came to heal, reconcile, and invite the world to enter freely and fully into the divine life" (Patricia Wilson-Kastner, *Faith, Feminism and the Christ* [Fortress, 1983], p. 128). We are called to be faithful to the dynamic reality of the love of the triune God.

In one sense, the community of God is the church—those of us called out of the world to be about God's work in the world. In another sense, the community of God is the Trinity—a uniquely Christian way of confessing our faith about the very nature of Godself and the ramifications of that confession for discipleship. Women's experience invites us all to take the doctrine of the Trinity more seriously. ■

